



## OPERATION STEEL HORSE

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**A**RMORABLE and aerial artillery concepts have given artillery a flexibility undreamed of in the past. It is no longer limited to the traditional role of following and supporting the ground-gaining arms. Artillery can now conduct its own offensive operations, not with the objective of gaining ground or seizing a piece of terrain, but with the traditional objectives of destruction, neutralization, harassment, and interdiction.

When the 1st Cavalry Division arrived in Vietnam, a permanent base camp was built near An Khe in the Central Highlands with a large heliport in the center. The initial operations were conducted outward from the base to destroy the local Viet Cong elements. Before long, the enemy had been pushed back leaving the artillery set up in the base camp without targets to take under fire.

While artillery was employed to support division operations in other areas, a few batteries always remained in the base camp. The problem was how to make the most of the firepower of these batteries.

The enemy moved his camps and training areas and changed supply and communications routes to put them out of range of the artillery in the base camp. This called for a reorientation in thinking and a change in tactics. Since there were always some units available to conduct artillery raid-type operations, this prompted the first Operation Steel Horse.

In the beginning, operations were confined to the vicinity of the base camp. Gradually, the area was expanded to include the entire division area which extended about 60 miles in all directions.

Operations could be hastily planned and executed or deliberate and of long duration. This depended principally on the nature of the target; the volume, timeliness, and credibility of intelligence; the area involved; and the availability of transport.

Only a few hours were required to mount and execute an Operation Steel Horse to any place within the zone of operations. Speed was essential as surprise was the most important element contributing to a successful operation.

Batteries were stripped down to the bare essentials; usually, only four of a battery's six guns were employed. Each artillery battalion maintained one battery on alert for this type of operation. The alert battery could be on the move within 30 minutes.

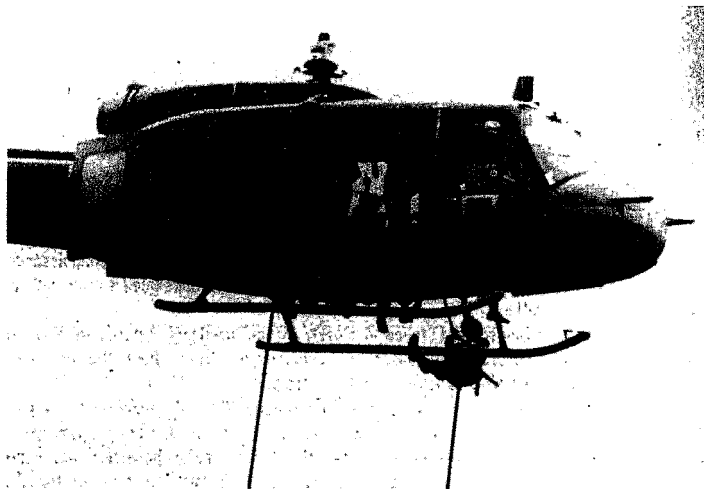
A typical hasty operation went something like this. When the division decided to conduct an artillery raid outside the range of the emplaced tube artillery, transportation was allocated and arrangements made for a small security detachment. An artillery battalion was alerted to prepare a battery for immediate employment, and a hasty reconnaissance was conducted. The artillery, security force, and helicopters were marshaled and moved toward the new firing position.

The security force landed first, followed closely by the howitzers. Targets were taken under fire using either observed or unobserved fire techniques. In one hour, the firing was completed and the force moved back to the base camp.

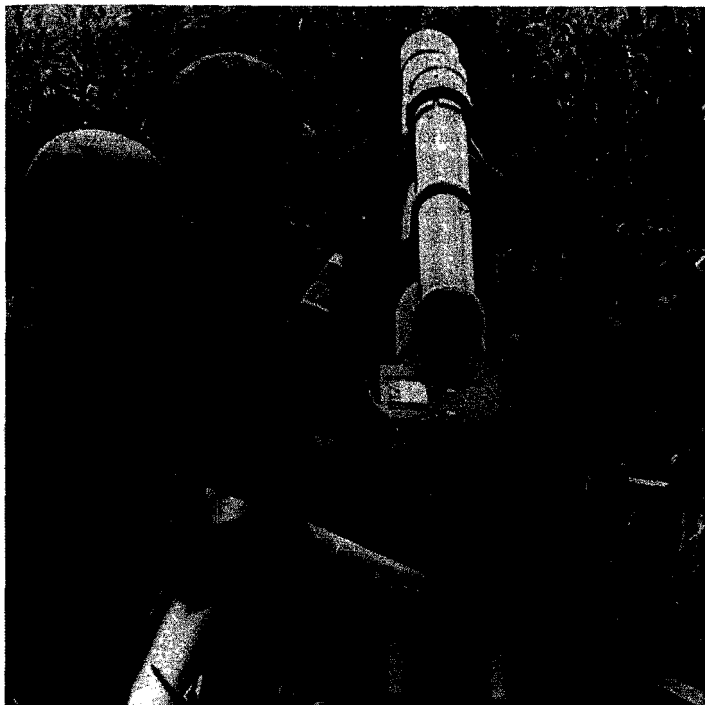
All calibers of artillery were used for these operations. The 155-millimeter and eight-inch howitzers and the 175-millimeter guns were limited to ground movement. The aerial artillery (helicopter-mounted rocket systems) and the 105-millimeter howitzers were the real workhorses; they were the only artillery capable of rapid movement to hit the enemy in his "safe havens."



**Ammunition is carried in sling loads**



**Cavalrymen rappel into area to secure landing zone**



**Artillerymen wait for command to load**

The aerial artillery was able to attack any target in the zone; however, it was limited in stay time and ammunition payload. The 105-millimeter howitzers had the advantages of either ground or air mobility, unlimited stay time, heavier projectile with more penetrating power, and were easily resupplied with ammunition. Limiting factors were target intelligence, transportation, the road net, and the enemy threat at or en route to the forward position.

Target intelligence was the most important factor in triggering a Steel Horse. Every possible source was exploited. The division zone was divided into sectors, and an elaborate target card system was developed. The division cavalry reconnaissance squadron was one of the best sources of intelligence. Division artillery also had its own aerial surveillance program. Every aircraft in the division was a potential source of intelligence, and all pilots immediately reported any suspect or actual sightings.

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In addition, the visual (photo) and electronic surveillance sections proved to be invaluable in locating bivouacs and troop movements. Local US advisors and Special Forces personnel were also a source of information.

Whenever possible, firing data was computed prior to the occupation of the new position. For any degree of accuracy, the minimum requirements were a position area survey and meteorological data. Soon after arriving in Vietnam, a program was started which



*US Army Photos*

**Firing at suspected enemy locations**

eventually extended survey over the entire zone. If the position to be occupied was near a traveled road, chances were that a survey control point was nearby.

Remote and jungle clearing positions were seldom surveyed. Meteorological data was available for most areas. Most of the operations relied on aerial observers to adjust fires. A favorite method was to employ a rocket ship from the aerial artillery battalion to adjust the fire. The tube artillery would fire on the target area, and, if any Viet Cong were flushed from cover, the aerial artillery would attack with rockets. This was a highly successful tactic and often repeated.

If the operation was conducted at night or during periods of reduced visibility, there was no adjustment, and firing data was upgraded by all available means. Abbreviated registrations were also common, and, if ammunition was available, zone fires were delivered.

Surveillance or damage assessment was always a weak spot. Most of the targets were in some sort of jungle growth and, therefore, difficult to see. Local indigenous intelligence sources were invaluable in this respect and often reported on the results of operations. Many reports attested to the effectiveness of the program against base areas and along supply routes.

Frequency of operations depended more on the availability of artillery and transport than any other factors. Helicopter availability was the key in most cases as usually there were higher priority missions. Ground transport was normally available, but this limited the operations to the vicinity of the division base. At least two or more operations were mounted each week, and most lasted about eight hours.

The Special Forces camps located in the division zone benefited most from Operation Steel Horse. These camps, situated in isolated but strategic positions, have only relatively short-range mortars for fire support. They are constantly harassed by the Viet Cong who operate just outside the range of the camp weapons. Few of the camps can be readily reached by road unless a road-clearing operation is mounted.

Either aerial artillery or a battery of four 105-millimeter howitzers would be moved to the camp to provide fire support for one to three days. Besides the obvious damage which could be inflicted on the enemy forces, the presence of the artillery served to boost the morale of those in the camp.

One often hears "there is nothing new under the sun," and certainly Operation Steel Horse was not an entirely new concept. It was, however, a unique and aggressive use of artillery, and it did take full advantage of available firepower.

One senior artillery officer called it an "artillery raid," another an "assault by artillery." Other artillerymen preferred to call it Operation Steel Horse. Whatever name one gave to this type of operation, it was an artillery show, it was an assault, and it did spell trouble for the Viet Cong. The psychological impact on the enemy was terrifying, for, no matter where they were or where they went, they could not get out from under the guns.

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